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On Tinkering

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On Tinkering: A reflection on the four-year anniversary of the Penn Manuscript Collective

Expertise and archival research have a chicken-and-egg relationship, but expertise is often said to come first. Indeed, the academic world almost always behaves as if this were the case: many archives require project descriptions for admission, funding for archival research awaits a viable project, and so on among the gatekeepers and gatekeeping institutions in the academy.

In many ways, the idea that expertise comes before archival research makes sense. This approach ensures, for example, that researchers are not frivolously using time and funding. It also requires that researchers familiarize themselves with a field as to not ask simple questions that have already been answered. However, the idea that meaningful curiosity—that is, access to an archive—must be *earned* might not be the only way, or even the best way, to approach the use of archives. Indeed, often the most basic questions are most important (and, perhaps, most likely to be asked by those without expertise). The yoking of expertise to archival research also can also cause students to focus narrowly on the objects they study—a researcher is just reading a manuscript for the text, or the grammar, or the dating system. Artifacts lose much of their meaning when their value is measured solely in terms of utility to a research question.

In the fall of 2012 I learned a different approach to archival research when I took a seminar with Professor Peter Stallybrass. His goal, it seemed, was to get students with no expertise to begin research as soon as possible. He taught students not to ask one question of an object, but to ask *every question imaginable* about the objects they studied. For example, when I was looking at a manuscript, it was not enough to know the textual content of the manuscript I was reading. I had to understand the genre of manuscript, the scene of writing, the handwriting, the paper and inks used, the stamp or seal applied, the method of delivery, the original recipient's response to the manuscript, the way in which the manuscript was stored, and the provenance of the object. In Professor Stallybrass's class, it was more important to be curious than to be right. This did not mean that his students produced flimsy or inaccurate projects. Rather, because he taught his students to let curiosity dictate the direction of their research, his students invested themselves deeply in their projects and ended up becoming passionate experts on the objects they had chosen to study.

In 2013 Professor Stallybrass approached some of his former students, including me, and suggested that we start a club. The Penn Manuscript Collective was born. The goal of the club was simple: to make more time outside of class for students to tinker with archival projects, together. For the past four years, the club has nourished the curiosity of many in the greater Penn community. This first journal issue represents just a few of the projects that have intersected with the Penn Manuscript Collective over the past four years.